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PA-02 USIE-00 SP-02 PRS-01 /023 R

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**FH SECSTATE WASHDC
TO AMEMBASSY KABUL IMMEDIATE
INFO AMCONSUL PESHAWAR IMMEDIATE
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD IMMEDIATE
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI IMMEDIATE**

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E.O. 12356 N/A
TAGS: PREL, SCOH, AF, PK, IN
SUBJECT: WASHINGTON POST STORY ON SOVIET AFGHAN
OFFENSIVE

1. FOLLOWING STORY BY FRED HIATT APPEARED ON FRONT PAGE
OF THE WASHINGTON POST APRIL 24: BEGIN TEXT. SOVIETS
USE BOMBERS IN AFGHANISTAN: MAJOR OFFENSIVE LAUNCHED
AGAINST REBEL STRONGHOLD. THE SOVIET UNION HAS LAUNCHED
A MAJOR NEW OFFENSIVE IN AFGHANISTAN, FOR THE FIRST TIME
USING HEAVY BOMBERS AGAINST THE REBELS IN AN EFFORT TO
TAKE A STRONGHOLD THAT HAS RESISTED SIX PREVIOUS SOVIET
CAMPAIGNS, ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS SAID YESTERDAY.

THE POUNDING BY SOVIET TU16 BADGER BOMBERS BEGAN
SATURDAY MORNING AND CONTINUED THROUGH THE WEEKEND,
OFFICIALS SAID. A COLUMN OF 20,000 SOVIET AND AFGHAN
ARMY TROOPS WITH 600 TO 800 VEHICLES IS NOW MOVING NORTH
THROUGH THE PANJSHIR VALLEY, AN AREA THAT HAS CONTINUED
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TO RESIST COMMUNIST CONTROL.

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U.S. OFFICIALS SAID THE LATEST OFFENSIVE IN THE SOVIETS' FOUR-YEAR EFFORT TO CONTROL AFGHANISTAN IS LIKELY TO RESULT IN HIGH CASUALTIES ON BOTH SIDES, WITH CIVILIANS SUFFERING MOST FROM THE HIGH-ALTITUDE BOMBING.

THE NEW TACTICS APPEAR TO ESCALATE A TREND IN WHICH THE SOVIETS, FRUSTRATED BY THE STALEMATED WAR, HAVE RESORTED TO HEAVIER ATTACKS ON POPULATION CENTERS FROM HELICOPTERS, GROUND ATTACK PLANES AND NOW BOMBERS.

IN ATTACKING THE PANJSHIR, THE SOVIET UNION IS GOING AFTER ONE OF THE PRIME REBEL STRONGHOLDS AND THE MOST RENOWNED GUERRILLA COMMANDER, AHMED SHAH MASSOUD. MASSOUD, WHO HAS BEEN CALLED THE CHE GUEVARA OF AFGHANISTAN, MAY HAVE PROVOKED THE OFFENSIVE WHEN HIS MEN RECENTLY BLEW UP TWO BRIDGES NORTH OF KABUL, THE CAPITAL, OFFICIALS SAID.

BUT IF MASSOUD'S ACTION DICTATED THE TIMING OF THE OFFENSIVE, THE SOVIET UNION HAD BEEN BUILDING UP TO IT. DURING THE PAST SEVERAL WEEKS, THE SOVIETS INCREASED THEIR TROOP CONTINGENT IN KABUL AND DEPLOYED ABOUT 100 BOMBERS ON THEIR BORDER WITH AFGHANISTAN.

THE SOVIET UNION INVADED AFGHANISTAN IN DECEMBER, 1979, AND INSTALLED A FRIENDLY GOVERNMENT IN KABUL. BUT MUCH OF THE COUNTRYSIDE HAS REMAINED HOSTILE TO THE SOVIET OCCUPIERS AND THE AFGHAN ARMY THAT SUPPORTS THEM, WITH THE MUJAHEDDIN - AS THE AFGHAN REBELS ARE CALLED - WAGING A WAR OF ATTRITION THAT SEEMS TO HAVE GROWN MORE EFFECTIVE DURING THE LAST FOUR YEARS.

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THE SOVIETS HAVE STATIONED MORE THAN 100,000 TROOPS IN THE COUNTRY AND 30,000 MORE ALONG THE BORDER. THEY HAVE USED MI24 HIND HELICOPTER GUNSHIPS EXTENSIVELY, BUT UNTIL THIS WEEKEND HAD REFRAINED FROM THE KIND OF HIGH-ALTITUDE, WIDESPREAD BOMBING THAT THE UNITED STATES USED IN VIETNAM IN AN ATTEMPT TO DEMORALIZE ENEMY FORCES.

ON SATURDAY, HOWEVER, THE SOVIETS SENT ABOUT THREE DOZEN MEDIUM-RANGE BADGER BOMBERS AND A PROBABLY LARGER

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NUMBER OF SU24 FENCER FIGHTER-BOMBERS FROM BASES ALONG THE BORDER TO ATTACK THE PANJSHIR VALLEY. THE BOMBARDMENT WAS FOLLOWED BY CLOSE-IN ATTACKS FROM GROUND ATTACK PLANES AND HELICOPTERS, PLUS HEAVY ARTILLERY SHELLING, OFFICIALS SAID.

HASSOUD HAS ESTABLISHED A PRIMITIVE RESISTANCE GOVERNMENT IN THE PANJSHIR, AND ABOUT 10,000 REBELS ARE SAID TO BE ENSCONCED THERE, MANY IN CAVES ALONG THE VALLEY'S SIDES.

HASSOUD'S REBELS TOOK ADVANTAGE OF A SEMI-OFFICIAL TRUCE WITH THE SOVIETS LAST YEAR TO FORTIFY GUN POSITIONS AND AMMUNITION STORES DEEP IN THE MOUNTAINS, WHICH IS WHY U.S. OFFICIALS PREDICTED THAT THE BADGER BOMBING WOULD HARM VILLAGES MORE THAN MUJAHEDDIN POSITIONS.

BY EARLY YESTERDAY, A COLUMN OF SOVIET AND AFGHAN TROOPS REPORTEDLY HAD ADVANCED AS FAR NORTH AS ROKHEK, WHICH THE SOVIETS HAD OCCUPIED FOR ABOUT 10 MONTHS TWO YEARS AGO BUT HAD ABANDONED UNDER PRESSURE FROM THE MUJAHEDDIN. OFFICIALS WERE MAKING NO PREDICTIONS ABOUT HOW LONG THIS OFFENSIVE WOULD LAST.

"THIS IS THE LARGEST ATTEMPT TO GO IN THERE," ONE
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OFFICIAL SAID. "BUT THEY'LL HAVE A HARD TIME GETTING THEM (THE MUJAHEDDIN) OUT OF THIS VALLEY."

"THE SOVIETS AS OF NOW, AFTER SIX TRIES, DON'T CONTROL THE VALLEY," ANOTHER OFFICIAL SAID. "BUT WE CAN'T SAY WHAT THEIR GOALS ARE - WHETHER THEY WANT TO BURN CROPS, OR KILL HASSOUD, OR CONTROL THE VALLEY."

OFFICIALS ALSO DID NOT SAY HOW MANY OF THE ATTACKING TROOPS ARE SOVIET. THE SOVIET UNION HAS TENDED TO LET THE AFGHAN ARMY DO MUCH OF THE GROUND FIGHTING, WHILE THE SOVIETS FLY SOME AIRCRAFT AND OPERATE SOME OF THE TANKS AND OTHER HEAVY VEHICLES FURTHER TO THE REAR. END TEXT. KABUL MINIMIZE CONSIDERED. DAM

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